Conrad's Cities

Stephen E. Tabachnick

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 36, Number 2, 1993, pp. 258-262 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/373422/summary
certain attractive rhetorical balance in its paradoxical oppositions. We have the impression that something analytical has been said; it is only when we look again at the sentence that we discover that more questions have been raised than answered. How does narrative “increase in intensity”? Is there a single language “appropriate” both to common experience and extraordinary vision? How do we know when that language is discovered? Just how “extraordinary” is this vision, anyway?

And this is to say nothing of the questions feminist criticism has raised regarding Stephen’s encounter with the prostitute: but then, there is nothing in Peterson’s book that could not easily have been written before the advent of feminist criticism. Peterson is scrupulous about citing most of the important books on Joyce published in the past twenty-five years, either in his text or (more often) in footnotes, but at no point does he enter into genuine dialogue with them. Structuralists, semioticians, poststructuralists, Lacanians, Marxists, and New Historicists all suffer the fate of feminists; Peterson is happy to point vaguely toward their work, but there is no evidence that any of it has affected his own reading of Joyce. Fair enough—no one requires Peterson to be a contemporary theorist. But it was Peterson himself who invoked as his rationale the changing and evolving nature of Joyce criticism. Surely it would not be necessary to smother undergraduates under loads of contemporary theory to give them some sense of the ways in which Joycean criticism has changed in the past twenty-five years. Indeed, the Twayne series might be an excellent place to do just that.

R. B. Kershner
University of Florida

Conrad’s Cities


Conrad’s Cities is a worthy tribute not only to the exceptional scholar Hans van Marle but to Joseph Conrad himself. Its seventeen essays are uniformly clearly written, informative, and up-to-date but free of the aggressive kind of “theorizing” that threatens “to obliterate literature itself,” in the words of one of the contributors, Paul Kirschner.

Kirschner’s piece on Under Western Eyes, containing fascinating detective work and superb maps and photographs, is perhaps the best example of the many riches awaiting the reader in this book, particularly in its biographical and historical essays. Among many other things,
Kirschner establishes “the fact that a twenty-three-year-old Russian with the unusual name of Rasoumoff, who claimed to be a student in the faculty of philosophy, had lodgings in Geneva a few hundred yards from Conrad, four months before Conrad began writing a novel he at first called after its protagonist, a philosophy student named Razumov. ... Further: just around the corner from Stéphane Rasoumoff’s lodgings, at 91-93 rue de Carouge, was a Bolshevik educational and propaganda centre ... and ... a few doors away was the club of Polish social-democratic émigrés, at which Lenin frequently spoke.” Kirschner’s primary historical work allows us to visualize the character Razumov’s world more concretely, to understand the significance of his peregrinations around Geneva in detail, and to appreciate in greater depth Conrad’s engagement with the physical, political and moral landscape of his day.

Gene Moore deserves praise not only because he edited this excellent volume, but because his own “Conrad in Amsterdam,” originally published in Conradiana, is one of the best pieces in the book. Moore uses photos and maps to illuminate the role of the city in influencing the writing of Mirror of the Sea, as well as Almayer’s Folly and An Outcast of the Islands. Like Kirschner, Moore not only allows us to visualize a major city as it existed around one hundred years ago, but to feel the mental climate and preoccupations that are behind some of Conrad’s writings. Warsaw is “mentioned only once and briefly” in Conrad’s works, but as Zdzisaw Najder points out, it was still very important to him. Najder provides a fascinating view of the city in the 1860s, including a photo of the street and house in which Conrad lived with his parents in 1861 and a map showing exactly where Conrad’s father was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel. Apollo Korzeniowski wrote a patriotic ode to the spirit of the people of Warsaw, and meetings of the underground “Committee of the Movement” took place in his apartment, leading to his arrest and exile—both of which profoundly affected the young Conrad.

Viktor Borisov’s superb piece on Vologda, the very old town in northern Russia where Apollo, Ewa and five-year-old Konrad Korzeniowski spent their exile from June 1862 to January 1863, illuminates a little-known topographical and spiritual influence on Joseph Conrad. After an admirable review of this town’s interesting history, Borisov shows in detail how the family acted and lived during those months. Although Conrad’s mother’s health deteriorated sharply in Vologda, the exile was intellectually and spiritually less bleak than it might seem. The town
was so provincial that one landowner "had not heard that Napoleon had been in Russia in the year twelve," but Apollo met numerous Polish nationalist exiles and Russian revolutionary intellectuals, and the governor was a Pole who was himself sympathetic to the exiles.

In 1869, Conrad and his father settled in Cracow, and Conrad remained there until 1873. Andrzej Braun's essay makes clear the situation of Conrad's father, who was to die there in 1869, the circumstances of the boy's education, and then the complex travel situation surrounding the Conrad family's visit to the city in August 1914, when mobilization began to take place. He shows the importance of Conrad's early Cracow experience to his choice of a sailor's life.

Jacques Berthoud could not, of course, do historical work on Sulaco itself, since this geographical center of Nostromo never existed. But he offers corrections to Cedric Watts's map of Conrad's imaginary city and then details the symbolic significance of the post-revolutionary architectural changes that take place there by the end of the novel. Using urban planning and historical studies, he shows how well Conrad's fictional locale corresponds to South American reality one hundred years ago. The reader feels that Berthoud himself has actually visited this city of Conrad's imagination, and he has strengthened the powerful impression left by Nostromo itself, that Sulaco does exist.

Claudine Lesage uses photographs as part of her effort to show the influence of Conrad's visit to Hyères and the Giens Peninsula on a few pages of The Rover, and suggests possible literary reasons for his departures from actual topography. Ugo Mursia shows how Conrad's depiction of Genoa in the unfinished novel Suspense is based on his early memories of the city and his brief stay there in October 1914. He finds that on first sight the description of the city seems completely factual, but upon closer examination, "the setting turns out to be a mixture of fantasy and reality, which, of course, is typical of the author's traditional methods of composition." Similarly, Robert Hampson concludes that "an exactly conceived topography" of London "underlies both The Secret Agent and Chance" but that in Chance "this topographical exactitude is combined with detailed realistic description, which is both the ground for—and at odds with—a highly self-conscious narrative method that emphasises hypothesis, hesitancy, and indeterminacy."

In the concluding essay in the volume, Ian Watt recalls how his youthful visit to Conrad's grave led much later during Watt's time as a Japanese prisoner of war to his sudden realization that Jessie Conrad
was not mentioned on Conrad’s gravestone and that the reason for this “must have been a bad quarrel or misunderstanding . . . between Joseph and her.” His investigation reveals hidden family quarrels.

Other essays contain illuminating critical (as opposed to biographical and historical) discussions of the literary influences on and significance of Conrad’s portrayal of places, particularly London. Hugh Epstein demonstrates that “Conrad’s London, whilst impressing so many readers as having the plasticity of first-hand experience, is constituted as much from literary materials as from the immaterial presences of form, texture and colour that we might suppose to have lived in Conrad’s memory.” For Epstein, Dickens is the crucial influence on Conrad’s description of the city in *The Secret Agent*. Martin Ray claims that although “The geography of *The Secret Agent* is realistic . . . it is not very detailed and does not betray any profound intimacy with the capital,” and then goes on to claim H. G. Wells as a major influence on the novel. Cedric Watts shows how London in *The Secret Agent* “though depicted predominantly in its depressing aspects . . . emerges as possibly the most memorably potent entity of the text.” Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan’s Bakhtinian approach leads her to the similar point that Conrad’s London in *The Secret Agent* “is a heap of dead matter which swallows up and drowns the characters.” She finds that because of his lack of faith in the morality of social and political institutions, “the Secret Agent of the novel, the true anarchist amidst the sham revolutionaries, is none other than Conrad himself.”

J. H. Stape’s piece on Singapore in “The End of the Tether” goes beyond Norman Sherry’s demonstration of the fidelity of Conrad’s description to show how Conrad’s presentation of the city “functions structurally and thematically to generate the story’s relentlessly ironic texture.”

One of the best of the primarily critical essays is Eloise Knapp Hay’s spirited defense of her position that Conrad and Marlow are separate entities, and that this separation remains crucial to an interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, which has been under attack by some African and feminist writers. For Hay, Conrad’s “whited sepulchre” signifies not only Brussels, but the British part of Calcutta and “could also apply to the whiteness of marble monuments in London.” She argues convincingly that Conrad was attacking imperialism albeit “through a misted lens.” For her, *Heart of Darkness* is about Marlow’s “denial of, and ultimate
refusal to examine, his listeners' and his own commitment to England's part in the exploitation of Africa."

Juliet McLaughlin's detailed examination of Conrad's descriptions of cities throughout his fiction leads her to the conclusion that he did not like them very much, and that for him "city life is, at best, trivial and de-humanizing." Most of the contributors to this volume would probably accept the accuracy of that conclusion. But ironically, Conrad's dislike of cities has produced not only some of his very best writing but some of the best scholarship and criticism about his writing, which is abundantly in evidence in this collection.

Stephen E. Tabachnick
The University of Oklahoma

Lord Jim


ROSS C MURFIN has striven to find in Joseph Conrad's great novel, Lord Jim, values undetermined by earlier critics. Not even John Batchelor's Lord Jim (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988) could completely capture the most basic "truth." In Lord Jim: After the Truth, Murfin clearly defines his purpose, but he succeeds only in suggesting a slight advance over his predecessor's achievement. He also reveals, though, his enjoyment in what he is able to accomplish.

Murfin's book combines a familiar study of the biographical and historical background of Conrad's Lord Jim, a rapid summary of critical response to this book, and a detailed analysis of the work itself divided into groups of chapters, or "quarters," of the protagonist's life. Murfin reveals his failure to find what may be called the entire truth in Lord Jim by placing a question mark after the title of his chapter 7, "After the Quest: The Truth?" But who could possibly search out the entire truth embedded in such an erudite novel as Lord Jim? He succeeds, however, in arousing us to see more deeply into this novel than we have previously been able to do.

The first quarter, entitled "The Fall: 'I Had Jumped . . . It Seemed'" (with capitalizations which are not Conrad's), establishes Jim's story as a modern tragedy and traces his life from the beginning to his unfortunate jump from the Patna. In writing about Jim's background, Murfin shows that this novel is not unlike ancient Greek tragedy and that the protagonist is thus a Greek hero. Also, the hero's fall from high to low